The Crying Child

On Colonial Archives, Digitization, and Ethics of Care in the Cultural Commons

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This article sketches key concerns surrounding the digital reproduction of enslaved and colonized subjects held in cultural heritage collections. It centralizes one photograph of a crying Afro-Caribbean child from St. Croix, housed in the Royal Danish Library, to demonstrate the unresolved ethical matters present in retrospective attempts to visualize colonialism. Working with affect and haunting as research material, the inquiry questions how museums and other cultural heritage institutions are caretaking historical violations, identifying themselves as hosting agents, and navigating issues of trust and accountability as they make their colonial collections available online. Speculating about what an ethics of care in representation could look like, the article draws on reparatory artistic engagements with such imagery and proposes how metadata could be rethought as a cataloging space with the potential to alter historical imbalances of power.

Why risk the contamination involved in restating the maledictions, obscenities, columns of losses and gains, and measures of value by which captive lives were inscribed and extinguished? Why subject the dead to new dangers and to a second order of violence? Or are the merchant's words the bridge to the dead or the scriptural tombs in which they await us? ("Venus in Two Acts," Saidiya V. Hartman, 2008)

While researching I become part of your army of ghosts. Haunting. Haunting. (Unearthing. In Conversation, Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński)[1]

This article is concerned with how we attend to the dead represented in the open digital commons, those ancestors glimpsed in code, through substitute JPEGs and TIFF files. It considers how we welcome people into mindful encounters with representations of enslavement and colonization and how we guide people overall in the use and circulation of sensitive visual material. By "we" I refer to those of us doing the work of historical and cultural narration and caretaking, but I am also addressing our students as well. To borrow the words of Susan A. Crane in the context of Holocaust atrocity, I "want to highlight the ethical torque of knowing the [slavery or colonial] past through images for anyone who is historically conscious, and from that consciousness propose alternative responses" (Crane 2008:310). What is presented here, then, is a series of expanded reflections that draw on my art historical background researching African people and imagined types in early modern European art and also my current work on colonial archives and the performance of memory in Scandinavia. This experience is the window through which I delineate a speculative ethics of care in collections that is concerned with

"emotional justice," as Marika Cifor describes it: "framing records as repositories of affect" and then appraising them (working with, describing, and sharing them) as such (Cifor 2016:14). Responding to the delicate questions posed by Saidiya Hartman in her seminal essay "Venus in Two Acts," the whole discussion negotiates tensions surrounding access to representations and visibility of enslaved or colonized peoples, as they intersect with community needs for historical recognition, cultural ownership, and healing (Hartman 2008).

Critical thinking about the effects of digitization on cultural heritage politics, practices, and values is not new. In 1981 F. Gerald Ham called on the archive community to take seriously how technology was ushering in a new "postcustodial" era, which required the profession to reconsider its inherited roles and self-understanding as special gatekeepers of history (Ham 1981). Decentralization and mobility of information, datafication of culture, and negotiation of collaborative knowledge production are the ongoing concerns that have surrounded transformations in collections management systems. Ross Parry's invocation of the term "rescripting" in *Recoding the Museum* adequately describes what has been required along the computational and conceptual road to handle fundamental issues of trust and ownership central to what it means to be an institution (Cameron and Kenderdine 2010 [2007]; Parry 2008:82).

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1. A quotation from the artwork: Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński, *Unearthing. In Conversation*, 2017, video, duration 13:00 minutes.

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Now digitized artifacts and documents have come to represent their own forms of remembrance and are in general positively viewed as the means through which access to out-of-reach and/or decaying collections can be brokered. Digitization has also provided a range of innovative solutions (3-D scanning, 360-degree photography, OCR [optimal character recognition] combined with AI [artificial intelligence]), with the front-end result of enabling users to zoom into and manipulate collections on their own terms.

Experience has taught, however, that digital solutions in heritage contexts come with challenges. And ethically contentious scenarios have specifically called into question the reproduction, recording, and sharing of sensitive material in this new data reality where there are clear gaps between what is legal to do and what is tolerable or just (Dalgleish 2011), for example, the vulnerabilities of caretaking LGBTQ+ archives, which concurrently reveal, empower, *and* riskily expose already marginalized people recorded there (Chenier 2015; Cowan and Rault 2018). Similarly, Suzannah Biernoff points to the "tangled history of symbolism and aversion" surrounding images of human disfigurement in World War II medical photography (Biernoff 2012:189). She narrates the morbid and troubling appropriation of these archival images in the context of a popular video game called *BioShock*. And the issue of archival censorship is a double-bind that was negotiated by librarians at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln who expressed their difficult "soul-searching" as they began digitizing back issues of the boisterous student-run satirical magazine *Awgwan* (1913–1946). They write in their sobering phenomenology of practice that manually scanning each page

> led us to see, at scale, the magazine's prejudices, biases, and oppressive and destructive rhetoric—both textual and visual. As we digitized issues and discussed what we read and observed, we became increasingly uncomfortable with the idea of making widely publicly available digital content full of such messages, which could be easily and broadly circulated via the Internet either without context or with ahistorical context. (Brink, Ducey, and Lorang 2016:18)

Alongside others who share the discomfort of unmediated access to, and batch scanning of, cultural memory, I too turn my attention to further troubling images; revisiting those breaches (in trust) and colonial hauntings that follow photographed Afro-diasporic subjects from moment of capture, through archive, into code. Activism and critical awareness-raising in data and internet studies provide an important (and urgent) context for these concerns, since they are grappling with wide-ranging manifestations of coloniality in technology, such as cyber racism, recording of black life and death in digital culture, white prototypicality in biometrics and identity management, and algorithmic bias (Browne 2010, 2015; Nakamura 2013; Sutherland 2017).[2] However, this particular discussion

really represents a specific request or demand of the cultural heritage sector to drop the illusion of techno-neutrality. As Haidy Geismar (2018) insists, "We need to explore how digital objects are used to constitute reality effects, creating object lessons by altering and participating in how we both see and understand the world" (19). Thus, I would like to explore what creativity might emerge and what shifts in institutional practices could take place if we asked questions such as these:

- What does it mean for an archive or collection to provide open digital access to materials representing violated subjects who did not necessarily consent to being documented?
- To what extent are institutions taking seriously non-European perspectives on looking at, or engaging with, ancestor remains?
- And how can we extend concepts of caretaking and custodianship beyond institutions toward reparative strategies proposed by artists, activists, and other agents of change?

Some of the answers to these questions will require much more than theoretical or artistic inquiry, for example, reception research with audiences and cultural practitioners. And there is still much complementary research required to augment work already done on the "mediatisation of memory" (Dijck 2007; Garde-Hansen 2011; Garde-Hansen, Hoskins, and Reading 2009; Hoskins 2017). Methodologically speaking, you will notice that I slip between disciplinary lingua—records, documents, artifacts, artworks, traces, sources, data—which at this stage makes it difficult to categorize the scholarly emphasis of this contribution. I have initially chosen to work this way because the rich interdisciplinary literature provides multiple points of access to the issue of what Achille Mbembe succinctly describes as the buried disorder of colonial "remains" and "debris" (2002:22). In short, this article is an invitation to dialogue. Adopting a montage methodology that also mixes words and images (sometimes speaking independently), I seek to actively pinpoint the ambiguity and quietness in the discourse, while inviting in other considerations. Since ethics and caretaking are the product of collective negotiation, this thought exercise should too be open for questioning and debate.

Punctum

One particular photograph is motivating this inquiry, a document in which issues of care, custodianship, affect, and oversight combine. This photograph suspends in time a Black body, a series of compositional choices, actions, and a sound. It represents a child standing alone in a nondescript setting, barefoot with overpronation, in a dusty linen top too short to be a dress, and crying. Clearly in visible distress, with a running nose and

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2. Inspiring examples of people and projects developing direct actions in the field include Joy Buolamwini's work in the *Algorithmic Justice*

League (https://www.ajlunited.org/), Harlo Holmes's work in *Guardian Project* (https://guardianproject.info/), and the work of Deb Raji as part of the Partnership on AI (https://www.partnershiponai.org/).

copious tears rolling down its face, the child's crinkled forehead gives a sense of concentrated energy exerted by all the emotion (fig. 1). Emotions that object to the circumstances of iconographic production. Because all the natural and affecting sounds of a child's cry are muted via the photographic lens onto paper, and further still in the digital image, the pregnant silence one experiences in encounters with this photograph across media is particularly arresting. The initial camera silenced the cry. Thus, it is what we cannot hear that marks the violations taking place in and around this image; and we need to perform a "bone deep listening, a sensing of the unbridgeable chasm" to fully access this "seen cry unheard" (Campt 2017; Moten 2003:83).

My first encounter with the photograph was face-to-face in an album, during archival research at the Royal Danish Library. It stood out as one of thousands of private and commercial images in their special collections, produced during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, on St. Croix, St. Thomas, and St. John, when the islands were under Danish colonial rule (Gøbel 2017; Krabbe Meyer 2019). Images made by Danes of life in the tropics, dressed in white cotton, attended to and supported by Afro-Caribbean people. Images that migrated with returnee families back to Denmark and were then stored for safekeeping. The photograph was taken around 1910

by Axel Ovesen (ca. 1885–1972), a military officer who went to St. Croix as a young man in 1906 and soon opened a studio there while building a publishing business. These were days of uncertainty on the islands, where emancipation of slavery had been achieved as the result of a rebellion in 1848. Following this, working conditions for the formerly enslaved grew worse, and contracts bound laborers and their families to plantations for miniscule wages. The mounting tensions erupted in a significant labor dispute in 1878 known as the "fireburn," which saw plantations destroyed in protest (Jensen 1998). By 1910 imported Caribbean sugar cane was being replaced by sugar beet produced locally in Denmark. The Danish government was also negotiating the sale of the islands, which during World War I were eventually transferred to the United States in 1917. They are now the US Virgin Islands. Axel Ovesen's images were thus documents tracing a landscape and community in transition.

The child in the photograph is unnamed and, so far, unknown, but we get a sense of the popularity of the image as an aide-mémoire, by way of its multiple appearances in Danish collections. For example, the photograph appears randomly pasted in the private albums of the Helweg-Larsen family and those of Major Theodor C. von Zeilaus, donated to the Royal Danish Library. In these particular album contexts one cannot

Figure 1.   Photograph of crying child pasted in the Helweg-Larsen family album (1910–1920). Photo credit Axel Ovesen (and Emilie Langkjær). Royal Danish Library.

fully decipher the intensions of private visual curatorship, which include a jarring mix of colonial views: crying child alongside street and harbor scenes with Caribbean people dressed in Sunday best, or crying child alongside a group portrait of Danish soldiers and a view from a horse race. In another album containing photographs and postcards, the image appears together with those of other Black children, who are categorized with handwritten notations. An older smiling girl standing with a confident pose and directly facing the camera is noted in English as "A nice girl." Another smiling young girl who has been dressed up with a bow in her hair tilts her head and stands among palm leaves. She is described in English as "A glad girl," although "glad" in Danish also means cheerful. Under the crying child's photograph is a handwritten note in Danish stating "En gnaven," meaning a grumpy or upset one (but also uncooperative).[3] Such labeling practices categorized Afro-Caribbean subjects as obedient and familiar types who could also be "tamed" through the cutting, pasting, and inscription of album production (Barthes 1999:117–119). And this process of reordering experience and describing the people among whom they lived in limiting terms contributed to a narration of "atypical" (even dissonant) memories for Danes "that wanted, and wants still, to communicate" (Langford 2001:23; Van Dartel 2012).

The crying child's image was used repeatedly in storytelling within private albums as an example of what Danish catalogers describe as "Folkeliv" (folk life) from the Virgin Islands— views of Afro-Caribbean people in daily situations like selling food at the market, carrying coal, or doing their laundry. The repetition is also likely because Ovesen transferred the image onto a postcard, which he too labeled at the bottom (close to the child's feet) with the pejorative title "A St. Croix Pickney, D.W.I." (fig. 2). This was an augmentation strategy similar to that of postcard makers across the Caribbean, which Krista Thompson explains sought to "control, stabilize, and contain the meaning of the cards and the images of the islands generally for potential travellers," as well as for those who would never take the trip (2006:257). The word "pickney" also had transnational resonance as a local adaptation of an old word used to describe children but given violent associations by way of the "Pickaninny" racist caricature during Jim Crow. In American literature and visual culture, the character was a popular trope whose core attributes were "juvenile status, dark skin" and "the state of being comically impervious to pain" (Bernstein 2012:20; Bogle 2003). The real child captured by Ovesen in St. Croix felt pain. But they entered the archive (and come to us now) as a metaphor for displacement, a repeating data-body with no name, no caretakers, no clear gender markers, no explanatory context. Crying without an identifiable source of provocation. Orphaned via the technology of photography into a "zone of nonbeing," and then slipped on paper into the storehouse of Danish colonial memories (Fanon 2008:2). A sobbing, miserable photographic *tronie* leaning mimetically
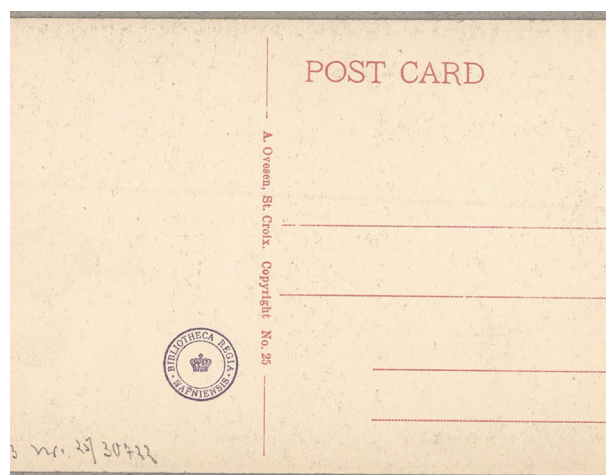

Figure 2. Back of the postcard "A St. Croix Pickney, D.W.I.," representing the crying child in St. Croix. Early twentieth century. Photo credit Axel Ovesen. Royal Danish Library.

on that old form of Dutch character painting that sought to articulate, through artistic skill, intense physiognomic expressions and emotions (Percival 2016:57–63). This is the kind of candid "infinitely reproducible, duplicatable image" that Okwui Enwezor once described as "truly archival" (2008:12), an enduring photographic impression of asymmetrical contact between colonizer and colonized (fig. 3).

We know that this postcard traveled with private correspondences across the Atlantic, and perhaps, in this context, it was intended as a rouse for (racial) humor. For example, just before Christmas in 1912, a Danish father in St. Croix sent the postcard to his son in Copenhagen, writing: "Dearest son! Here you have a little boy from St. Croix; he sure doesn't look happy, does he? But you must look happy all of the time; that's what you promised."[4] This boy received Afro-Caribbean tears in the post, as a gift from his absent father and a comparative antidote to his own separation anxiety. What promises (of happiness) did the colonial postcard circumvent, or protract, or stand in for? (Ahmed 2010:29). Evidently the postcard was sent for remedial effect, but toward what outcome (fig. 4)? Colonial postcards did considerable identity work within and between nations (Geary and Webb 1998). Tanya Sheehan's (2018:103–131) recent study of postcards in America provides a sobering assessment of national anti-Black communication in middle-class vernacular culture, arguing that use of photography to produce stereotypical and performative racial tropes legitimized the images on postcards as being "true" and "real." Considering the relationship between postcard images and their correspondence on the backs, Sheehan writes that "everyday

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3. Many thanks to Nina Cramer for providing nuanced translations of Danish terminology.

4. See "Folkeliv på St. Croix," a postcard in the Royal Danish Library picture collection, ID: DPK001339. The full Danish text reads: "St. Croix 15/12 1912 / Kære Dreng! / Her har du en lille Dreng fra St. Croix; han ser rigtignok ikke glad ud, vel? Men det gør du vel nok hele Tiden; det har du jo lovet / Din Far / Hr Jørgen Riisager, Sølundsvej 1, Copenhagen, Denmark, Europe." Translation by Nina Cramer.

Figure 3. Album page from "Fotos og prospektkort fra Dansk Vestindien" (Album 332). Early twentieth century. Royal Danish Library. Editorial blur added by the author.

encounters with comic images of African Americans, framed by the guiding hand of a trusted adult, had the ability to fuel children's fantasies of their own whiteness and rightness, encouraging the consolidation of a discrete and desired self" (113). British colonial postcards similarly used ethnographic photography of so-called everyday life to fortify imperial subjectivities (an "us" and a "them"), while authenticating the sender's exotic location and thrilling proximity to difference (Wollaeger 2006:71–127).

If we read "against the grain" of Ovesen's photograph, while at the same time registering its edges, marks, and textures, as Ann Stoler (2009) advises, then the emotional protest expressed by the child does offer a refusal with which to think and feel (50), a sonic disruption that resists the "terms of negation and dispossession" (Campt 2017:96). Certainly there were other Afro-Caribbean babies and children captured in photographs from the Islands, but this particular child haunts as a subject unwillingly forced into cultural labor, and this resonates across archival materialities, contexts, and time (fig. 5). What *were* the conditions of photographic production? How did Axel Ovesen meet and encounter this child? And, importantly, to whom did this child belong? There are no concrete answers beyond what the photograph tells, and it tells that something was—is—amiss. For what is this visualized cry if not an expression of separation (from the absent guardian) and a call for care and attachment, even a request for milk? Reading around the photo-

graph in other ways, and past the critique of Black parenting within its implied humor, the image could be interpreted as a provocation to Danish colonists on the affective state of things present and things to come, a Black mirror for their self-understanding as good colonial parents to the Islands, who will soon abandon their custodial "duty" and soothe their own upset with treasured photographic memories (Andersen 2013; Thisted 2009). This photograph could do such ideological work. But the important issue for us now is where *we* stand as onlookers in this colonial constellation, as witnesses to a Black child being archived and appropriated. The material distancing of this image means that we are unable to intervene in this moment passed; however, as Roland Barthes (1999) infamously told us, we can share it: "from a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me" (80). The cry can move us. Judith Nelson (2005) writes that "infant crying is interactive and relational from the very beginning of life. Infant cries must alert and unsettle protectors enough to bring them close, if not to bring them running" (19). So who and where are the protectors seeking to symbolically console this crying Black child in the open commons and fend off harm?—in other words, those conscientious witnesses determined to "restore the civilian skill of spectatorship: to be an addressee of this injury, to produce its meaning as injury, and to continue to address it" (Azoulay 2008:306; Gordon 2011).

Figure 4. "For eller Imod? / For or against?" 1916. Postcard. Harry Nielsen. Royal Danish Library.

Figure 5. *The Sense of Taste*, 1744 to 1747. Oil on canvas. 132.1 × 153.7 cm. Philippe Mercier. Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, USA.

Rough Notes on Custody, Hospitality, and Care

When Denmark transferred the people, land, and public property of its islands to the United States in 1917 for US$25 million in gold, a stipulation in the treaty of sale allowed for furniture, decorative items, and other artworks to follow the "West Indians" back home.[5] There was much material luggage in addition to private photographs, and over the ensuing years Denmark negotiated the removal of a large amount of official documents from the islands on the grounds of their importance as national heritage. Most documents were written in Danish until the mid-nineteenth century. Although there is a relatively equal share of state colonial documents in the US archives, Denmark became the primary custodian and narrator of the history of enslavement up to transfer, (gate)keeping materials that articulated the ways in which the country was entangled with the lives and fates of Afro-Caribbean people and their enslaved ancestors (Bastian 2001, 2003). The whole process of document removal after transfer deprived the Afro-Caribbean community on the US Virgin Islands of direct access to their stake in this shared heritage and has thus engendered an uneasy and profoundly biased memory-brokerage that privileged the Danish perspective and has, over time, allowed for nostalgia in the telling (and retelling) of this history (Andersen 2013; Blaagaard 2011; Fog Olwig 2003).

Afro-Caribbean citizens of the US Virgin Islands are in a process of confronting the scale of the Danish colonial archive, which is one of the best preserved in the world. It is an archive that attests to their genealogical roots, labor, revolt, cultural

expressions, image, and presence in space and time. The recent 2017 centenary commemoration of colonial transfer provided a critical (albeit challenging) moment of reflection and witnessed renewed interest and investigation into this history, and its consequences, on both sides of the Atlantic (Andersen 2020). Several 2017 exhibitions used the photographic archive as the starting point, or as a backdrop, for a discourse that Astrid Nonbo Andersen (2020) succinctly describes as marked by uncertainty and struggling with an inherited and dominant narrative of "innocent colonialism" (59; Krabbe Meyer 2019). During this process of historical redress, digital repatriation was centered by heritage institutions as a solution to immediate problems of access to documents, and the Danish National Archives in particular focused their efforts on this endeavor (Agostinho 2019). Between 2013 and 2017 they scanned 5 million pages of colonial administration documents and crowdsourced support for transcription since many were written in an old form of Danish.[6] They also produced a special website called The Danish West Indies: Sources of History, enabling people to discreetly search the records but also explore context through curated themed sections.[7] Similarly, the National Maritime Museum, National Museum of Denmark, and Royal Danish Library all provided digital access to colonial artworks, objects, photographs, and other documents, open-accessing as a reparative gesture of transparency.

Digitization has come with critiques of power, bias, and legitimacy, since the institutional drive to reproduce the excessive scale of the colonial project as big data enacts its own forms of erasure. As Daniela Agostinho (2019) writes, "this logic of quantification—itself embedded in the archives—can stand in the way of centring the experiences of the communities who lived under colonialism and slavery" (157), as well as defer access to latent expressions of their humanity. The digital option also raised the practical issue of consistency, since access to these resources requires electricity, a strong internet link, and computers or mobile devices, all of which become quite precarious when (for example) a hurricane hits the islands, as they did with Irma and Maria in 2017 (fig. 6). Most critically for this discussion, since much of this material is understood and treated as Danish "property" (made by Danish hands, and/or from private family collections), there have been few attempts to negotiate approvals or community support for the ways images of Afro-Caribbean ancestors are actually used, digitally or otherwise. This also means that labeling and descriptive practices in collections management systems have prioritized Danish representation and perspectives.

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5. See Article 3.2 of the sales treaty of August 4, 1916. The original handwritten version is both in English and Danish and is housed at the Danish National Archives (Rigsarkivet, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, E4 Traktater, VII 120 USA 1916 8 4).

6. The Danish National Archives have worked hard to transform their traditional image as a gatekeeper to this history. They recently produced a selection of films of people talking about their investment in the archives from different perspectives, in order to explain the positive aspects of digitization. See the full playlist of videos here: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLDOvgvDsiFrOpAUZZWnb0f-JaXeD06vX0.

7. See https://www.virgin-islands-history.org/en/.

Figure 6. "Ruins of Hurricane, 1928, Christiansted, V.I." A post-card from the Sophie Petersen album titled "Vestindien. 1926 & 1939. 1955" (Album No. F97). Royal Danish Geographical Society.

The legal versus moral discussion framing Danish and other colonial collections is a sore point. We know that artworks and images of enslaved and colonized peoples were predominantly envisioned by Europeans, who also controlled the means of production, rights of access, and dissemination. Jane Anderson (2013) critically centers this problem of "authorship" as an anxiety underpinning colonial archives and collections, especially for communities excluded from this peculiar logic of cultural preservation and meaning-making, a logic that keeps legal copyright (and thus the politics of custodianship) weighted toward the inheritors of colonial power. Communities with kin represented in archival material therefore have little or no legal stake in visual and other kinds of documents and must defend or claim the dead ambivalently, by arguing for "fair use," in contested terrain, as a matter of ethics and justice: What is the best way to attend to violated bodies and biographies without replicating historical patterns of abuse? Under what conditions should this document/artifact/image be seen? Archival initiatives within indigenous contexts, such as Project Naming in Canada for community identification of Inuit people in photography, or the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Data Archive (ATSIDA) as an intermediary for research data management, are demonstrative of thoughtful shifts in post- or decolonial knowledge production and sharing where represented communities are gathered as witnesses and experts around sensitive collections.[8] Their work recognizes that while the perspectives framing collections have been historically biased, ethics of care can be prioritized and reformulated to meet present-day access needs (fig. 7).

A browse through established international ethical guidelines for museums and archives reveals how ethics has been

primarily focused on risk assessment: protecting cultural assets as a legacy and enabling public access in the most efficient and nonharmful way (for objects and documents). However, the residual effects of colonial theft and appropriation on collections and professional practices are considerations that are now being prioritized. In Europe, initiatives such as the SWICH Network for building inclusive ethnographic museums,[9] and recent strategic reports responding to the politics of caretaking and restitution of contested African collections in particular, are clear signs that institutions are under pressure to change their self-understanding (Brown and Mairesse 2018; German Museums Association [GMA] 2019; Sarr and Savoy 2018). Within this context it has become clear that ethics of care requires more nuanced and holistic organizational mindsets to accommodate the vulnerabilities of postcolonial collections management. For example, Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, in their 2018 report to President Emmanuel Macron on the return of looted African artifacts, insist that while object encounters in collections are haunted, so too is the void left elsewhere. Reframing objects as diaspora (with dense accumulated memories), they ask, "How are we able then to restitute to these objects the sense and functions that once belonged to them, without neglecting the fact that they had been captured and then reshaped by a plurality of semantic, symbolic, and epistemological dispositives for more than a century?" (Sarr and Savoy 2018:30).

However, ethics of care bridges the personal and political, the structural and the specific. In March 2019 in the United States, Tamara Lanier (a retired senior state worker in Connecticut) filed an open lawsuit against the Peabody Museum at Harvard University for "wrongful seizure, possession and expropriation of photographic images" of her family.[10] Lanier has identified herself as the descendant of a man called Renty, who was the eldest of seven enslaved workers on a South Carolina cotton plantation, represented in early daguerreotypes from 1850. Renty, Delia, Jack, Drana, Jem, Alfred, and Fassena were all photographed naked by Joseph Zealey, who was commissioned by Swiss glaciologist Louis Agassiz, then a professor at Harvard (Rogers 2010; Wallis 1996). Agassiz was promoting racist science and segregation in America, and the photographs were research for his polygenism theory project, which he also conducted in Brazil (Isaac 1997; Rogers 2006). Harvard University now "owns" the daguerreotypes and charges a substantive fee for reproductive rights in books and other commercial merchandise. The photographs are not currently on public display, although it is possible to find them in high definition online (including Wikipedia). As a living descendent of Renty and Delia (his daughter), Lanier is claiming her family's property back and also asking Harvard to desist from continuing to profit on enslaved bodies. She argues that Harvard is

8. Project Naming (Libraries and Archives Canada): https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/news/videos/Pages/project-naming-picture-story.aspx. ATSIDA: https://www.atsida.edu.au/.

9. See https://www.swich-project.eu/about/index.html.

10. Lanier v. President and Fellows of Harvard College AKA Harvard Corporation, Harvard Board of Overseers, Harvard University, The Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Commonwealth of Massachusetts, March 20, 2019.

Figure 7. *Atlantic (Endless Row 1)*, 2009. Digital photograph by Jeannette Ehlers. © Jeannette Ehlers. Courtesy of the artist.

perpetuating the dynamics of slavery, which denied African Americans the right to own, claim, or inherit property. As we have already seen, this issue of ownership in slavery's afterlife is the unresolved trouble that will challenge this open case. And it will be interesting to see the extent to which Lanier will be asked to legitimize her claim to kinship, where the evidence base is once more reliant on the "official" archive and not the oral family lore from which she initially heard about her ancestors. But Lanier's personal intervention will prove an important action for rethinking reparative justice in the cultural domain, and it will certainly nourish the moral poetics of "fair use" in copyright law (Murray 2013).

Within this climate of redress, institutions are being asked to reconsider their terms of engagement in profound ways. We could describe the mindset required to revision institutional praxis and make room for complexity, as a hosting or hospitality approach, one that encourages questions about coexistence, such as *What is in the atmosphere? Who looks after and who receives care? Who is the host and who is the guest? How do we accommodate needs? And what are the rules of engagement?* Scholars are offering different suggestions for approach-

ing the layered responsibilities of ethical hosting (Bismarck and Meyer-Krahmer 2016). For example, Joel Wurl (2005) called for archives to shift from the traditional idea of custodianship to "stewardship" as a way to deal more equitably with records representing diverse ethnicities in collections. While this shift in language may seem subtle, Wurl (2005) argues that the difference is most clearly distinguished precisely around the tricky issue of ownership, writing that "a stewardship ethos encompasses a very different set of relationships between stake-holders and materials. It is characterized by partnership and continuity of association between repository and originator. In a stewardship approach, archival material is viewed less as property and more as cultural asset, jointly held and invested in by the archive and the community of origin" (72). Wurl further notes that "material may be gifted to a repository" not as a finite action but as part of an ongoing relationship, and that "the goals of stewardship are preservation and access to information, wherever it might be physically held, while intentions or claims of possessing the largest or most valuable yield of material for a given community are both irrelevant and hollow" (72). Similarly, Andreas Pantazatos also approaches the issue of ethical

caretaking of objects as active and relational by reformulating the responsibilities of museum trusteeship as being shaped by gestures and procedures of "entrusting." Taking the rather limited International Council of Museums (ICOM) ethical guidelines as a springboard, Pantazatos (2016) affirms the museum's critical role and capacity to "account for the transit [conveying] of objects between past and future in such a way as to secure the transfer of their significance, broadly constructed" (180). The framework explored is a triangular duty of care within museums: building "trust" by sustaining the significance of collections through an evolving "biography of objects," which must be developed through "negotiation" (187). Negotiation, Pantazatos writes, is the "ethical catalyst for the museums' duty of care" because it is not simply about awareness of multiple "beneficiaries and stakeholders," but also involves thinking about how these parties are involved in the entire life cycle of an object (187). Emphasizing that with trust and entrusting comes vulnerability (for we cannot be sure if our host will be competent), Pantazatos concludes that addressing core concepts of accountability, trusteeship, and care involves respectfully "allowing room for those stakeholders who can shape the transit of an object from past to future" (197).

In Denmark things are slowly beginning to change to accommodate and consider the ethical tensions of "custodianship" and to make room for the investments of multiple stakeholders. For example, following their exhibition *Blinde Vinkler/ Blind Spots: Images of the Danish West Indies Colony* (May 19, 2017–February 3, 2018), curators at the Royal Danish Library hosted a summer school for students in the US Virgin Islands, introducing their collections and participating in public talks there.[11] They have also produced norm-critical online educational materials from the exhibition for high school students in Denmark, to ensure continuity and raise awareness.[12] Small steps. Overall, however, the Danish situation is instructive (particularly when viewed within an energized international context), because it concretely shows how power is wielded through material/matter on the battleground of history. Denmark has the "things" that attest (witness, certify, authenticate) their colonial entanglements. In brokering these memories with the US Virgin Islands, through and with digital data, the texture or grain of the archive itself is once more revealed: the grain that represents "signatures of a history that neither can be scraped off nor removed without destroying the paper," the grain that brings the initial violations into "bolder relief" (Stoler 2009:8).

Grappling with Data

At this moment in the text, I initially wanted to reproduce an image that is both deeply troubling and demonstrative, an act of violence by an internet troll who recently repurposed a well-known American lynching photograph from 1930, in order to symbolically "hang" a European politician of African descent. I considered representing it with a heavy editorial blur, so that only the faint outlines of the action could be seen. I also contemplated abstracting a detail. But the purpose of lynching imagery was profound humiliation in the context of White supremacist solidarity, and this is an effect being mobilized by the anonymous troll (Apel and Smith 2007). In the end, I simply did not want to participate in its racist work. But the remediating action, and the image's very existence, underscores the necessity for vigilance surrounding the digitization of sensitive collections.

Now I want to think more loosely—which is to say sketch, intuit, browse freely across ideas. This is in order to consider the digital surrogates of collections and propose what might constitute "fair use" online, particularly when curators and institutions are not looking. One of my core concerns is that we have yet to delineate a sacred environment for the images that articulate (in part) the experiences of slavery and colonization, that we have not yet decided what material is off-limits. I say "off-limits" with trepidation because I do not mean to suggest cultural ghettoization but, rather, to insist on care where there has historically been none. Perhaps it is pertinent here to retrace the arc of the problem. Erasures of Black subjectivity in colonial documents, and in the information kept by collections that house them, index the hierarchies of rights and value embedded in the slavery system. These erasures also reenact what Édouard Glissant described as the "deterioration of person" marking African experiences of the "open boat" (2010:5). European use and commodification of the enslaved body for manual labor transferred to the domain of the visual, producing a surplus of images in different materials (ink, paint, paper, silver, wood, porcelain) that became surrogates for unsanctioned intimacies that only continued through the emergence of photography. The ethnographic use of photographs for record, capture, and surveillance also brought with it reproductive copyright issues tied to "legal personhood," which maintained a racialized view of privacy as "a privileged form of property" that could only be claimed by those who owned themselves and/or the means of production (Osucha 2009:73). Appropriation and excessive production of the Black body image as cipher has thus taken its toll, on the level of being, knowing, and doing.

So delineating some kind of sanctity for difficult images is not a simple task. As Susan Crane asks, "What constitutes an atrocity image? Do we 'know it when we see it'? Must it be sufficiently horrific and disgusting? Should the victims be innocents?" (2008:322). This whole terrain becomes even more complex when we think beyond photography. For example, it is currently possible to buy clothing and household goods with a digital imprint of the 1797 *Brookes* slave ship diagram (fig. 8). This is not a document representing identifiable people but rather an explanatory tool created by British abolitionists to express the dehumanizing mercantile logic of the trade, as African bodies met the technology of the ship (Radburn and Eltis 2019). Over time the image has acquired resonance as an
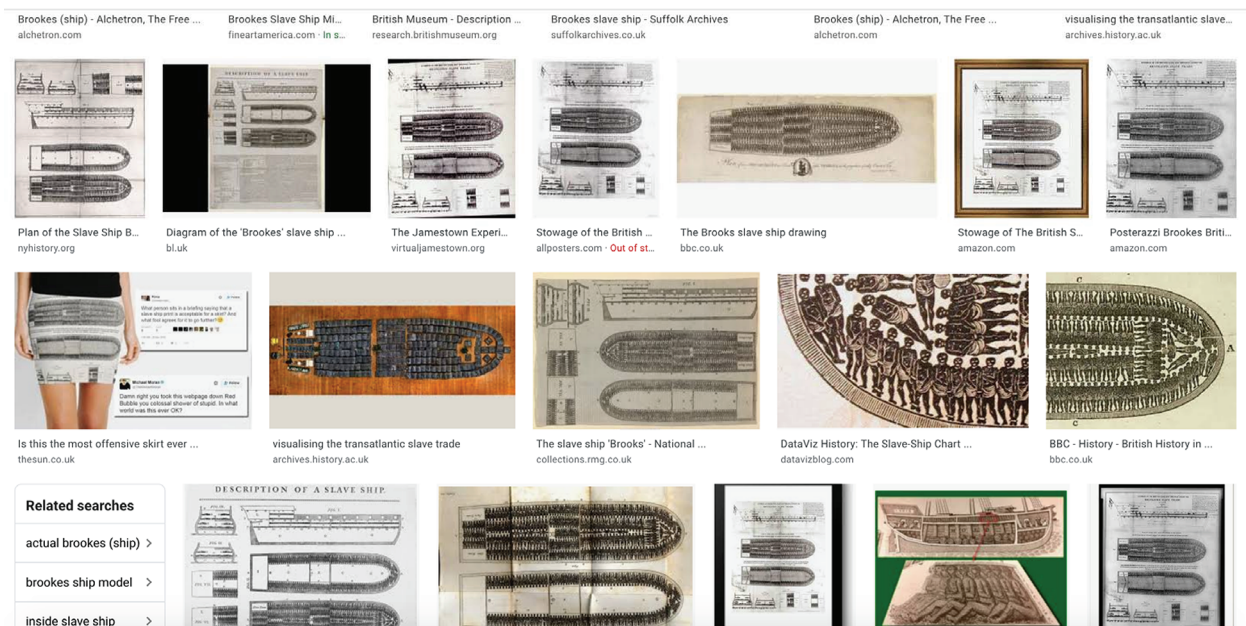
Figure 8. Screen capture from Google Images, with the search term "brookes slave ship print."

artifact representing one aspect of the Middle Passage Atlantic crossing, the "womb abyss," which is still a deeply painful part of Afro-diasporic memory work (Glissant 2010:6). Is the *Brookes* an image that needs "protecting"? Indigenous communities in varying contexts are exploring refusal and/or counteractive strategies when dealing with archival material, for example, Sápmi artists in their confrontations with ethnographic imagery, and particularly race biology photography and documents that in some cases represent known family members (Dobbin 2013). Native feminist Laura L. Terrance says about finding an indigenous woman's boarding school journal that "I am not going to tell you the name of the young woman the journal belonged to or even her tribe. I am not going to tell you which boarding school she attended and I am not going to tell you which library I found it in or where it is now" (Terrance 2011:621). Bodily and "analytic practices of refusal," argue Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "involve an active resistance to trading in pain and humiliation, and supply a rationale for blocking the settler colonial gaze that wants those stories" (Tuck and Yang 2014:812). To look, to say, to share, or not?

Enrique Martino makes a convincing argument that opensourcing digital collections does provide a way for archives to enter a wider cultural bloodstream, to be liberated from colonial structures and fully participate; that mobility enables sources to "disembark in different places, and circulate where archival remainders can be reactivated and made meaningful, not only by, for or through professional historians" (Martino 2014:410). And in terms of getting air, online research does provide healthy distance from the loaded choreographies of institutional access to originals: permissions, white gloves, dust, contained spaces, and quietness. But digital artifacts of a sensitive and dehumanizing nature are vulnerable without contextualization.

And Wayne Modest (2016) asks an important question: "What kinds of affective force do collections that evidence colonial relations have both within and without the museum?" (25). I am wondering if there is a way to develop an ethics of care for digitization that is able to signal to different kinds of users or audiences where and how sensitivity is required, not as an optional stance but as a prerequisite for the digital encounter.

It is important to consider the ways in which we find enslaved or colonized people and "things" in the sea of data online. My research, for example, is still reliant on historical and highly racialized terminology to find what we are looking for. General terms include "colonial," "slavery," "racism," "race," "Jim-crow," even "sugar" and then specific transatlantic locations or trading hubs such as "Barbados," "London," "Bristol," "Guinea," "Virginia," and "Haiti." Focusing on peculiar searches for people, I might type "African," "Black," "~~Negro~~," "~~Negress~~," "Slave," "Moor," "Blackface," "caricature," and "Venus." The following terms are adapted in different linguistic contexts: "esclave," "Zuckerhut," and "~~neger~~." But the outcome is the same. The database absorbs my searches, provides options for appropriate material based on relevance, and then holds a memory of that algorithmic trail until another inquiry is made. Then the process begins again, while keeping the colonial episteme intact: search, find, identify, claim, or steal (Christen 2007; Geismar and Mohns 2011). If this incessant searching for presence leaves pronounced traces, then what kind of digital layer are we adding to an already traumatized archive?

Digitization processes (particularly for institutions) come with profound losses. Mark Wolf (2000) succinctly writes that digitization is not a neutral process, for it "changes whatever passes through it" (89). In a technical sense objects are dematerialized, and this influences how institutions handle the

data. As Joanna Sassoon (2005) emphasizes, photographic collections in particular are "reduced to, and managed as, data banks of images, understood to be uncomplicated, transparent and passive representations of truth" (204). Similarly, Joan M. Schwartz (2002) argues that photographic collections that do not provide contextual data transform "photographic archives into stock photo libraries, reducing photographs to their visible elements, and conflating photographic content and photographic meaning" (157). Certainly, there is ambiguity around what is materially lost and what is gained in mediatization. Yet Fiona Cameron (2010 [2007]) insists, as others have, that digital assets are not merely referential: "the digital historical object can exist in many realms and perform many roles that go beyond reproduction, interpretation, education, documentation, and archive" (68). They can have a rich cultural life outside of institutional bounds.

Returning to Axel Ovesen's photograph, we can see how data orphanings act out in real time and point toward the delicacies of custodianship online. If you tried to search for this photograph or the postcard on the Royal Danish Library's digital collection, it would be by geographic context, photographer, or by album owner. The main keyword attached to the photograph is "børn" or "children" in English. This keyword also links Ovesen's images to a range of others from similarly precarious situations, such as "Eskimo-types; Children; Hudson Bay" and "Danish red cross feeds German children" and "Poor children 'Annaly'." Since several of Denmark's public collections are tied to an aggregate service that also makes digitized material available on Europeana (the European-wide archival database), it is possible to also find the photograph without entering the library's institutional interface. However, the same search restrictions apply. On the one hand, the child is somewhat protected by extremely limited metadata (basically for researchers with an interest), but on the other hand, the image still hovers on servers and clouds without proper contextualization—hovers there until someone decides to query, scroll, click, zoom in, and then download.

Momentarily, then, I want to speculate about the possibilities for transforming metadata into a repository of necessary tension, where one can "return" to colonial moments and produce what Anjali Arondekar (2006) calls "a counter-record of that history" (12). Metadata as a quiet, undercommons reconfiguring the digital thoroughfares (associations, keywords, hyperlinks) that bring a public into encounters with challenging histories (Sassoon 2005:208–210)—but also, metadata as an alternative cataloging space capable of narrating in full an object's life and afterlife, and making that known to users with each right-click and download. So, here is a proposition: What if the digital object could do all the speaking that the original could not do? What if the digital object could say on behalf of persons represented: "Look, here is my story. I've experienced pain, and now you are part of it; tell me what you intend to do with me?" And such a question, extended by way of a collection to the invisible user, seems fair. It is quite similar to the one in Susan Crane's (2008) pedagogy with students after they

have seen harrowing images: "And so I ask my students, with no political agenda in mind: what are you going to do with what you now know? The ethics of collective memory rests with their decisions and may determine what we choose to look at" (323). Here in this speculation, I am asking the data to perform—to perform a(nother) haunting (Blackman 2019; Gordon 2008). Because ghosts make their presences felt, precisely in those moments when the organizing structure has ruptured a caretaking contract; when the crime has not been sufficiently named or borne witness to; when someone is not paying attention. The ghost is "pregnant with unfulfilled possibility, with the something to be done that the wavering present is demanding" (Gordon 2008:183). And I know that what I am suggesting here is a form of labor that may be unrealistic on the level of scale, not just because of the sheer volume of collections already digitized but also due to the extra space and electrical energy more embedded data require. However, the opportunities for intervening both in back-end collections practices and web user experience, which insists on a more conscientious data flow around the commons, feels like something approximating practical ethics.

Praxis

I began this paper tentatively and I end it in the same way, uncertain whether I have adequately conveyed what an ethics of care in the open commons could look or feel like. But I have sketched some lines around issues of trust, community, affect, afterlives, and mattering. Let me once more invoke the crying child, which encouraged this veritable thought experiment and which has become in this text a reluctant metaphor for the state of digitized colonial collections (at least in Denmark). In 2016, Crucian artist La Vaughn Belle included this child in a photomontage series called *Upward Mobility*, *Learning to Be*, *Preacher Man Belle, Obeah Man Brown*, *St. Croix Pickney* (2016), where she worked with high-definition digital copies of colonial photographs in the Royal Danish Library collection. Here she juxtaposes the collection's images with old photographs of herself and her parents, producing some very moving digital diptychs that hinge on the archive itself. Her reparative gestures integrate unnamed people back into the context of a family album, fusing community bonds and providing them a place to rest and to be resignified. At the same time, she inserts and asserts her story into those partially told and fragmented Danish memories saved by various institutions that hold copies of these photographic images. Since these are not photographs the artist took herself but are slivers of family memory, Belle's juxtapositions also disrupt the temporal register, blending identities to reveal alternative possibilities for bodies in a shared (post) colonial location. Does Belle find visual resonances by coincidence, or does photography call certain bodies into peculiar engagements with the viewfinder?

In the series, Belle also remakes titles, or appropriates them from different archives, asking the viewer to consider how colonial typologies were and are made by language but also to
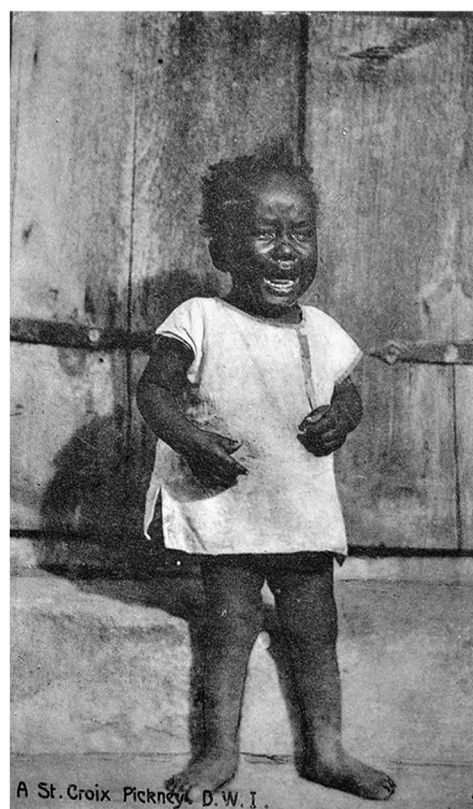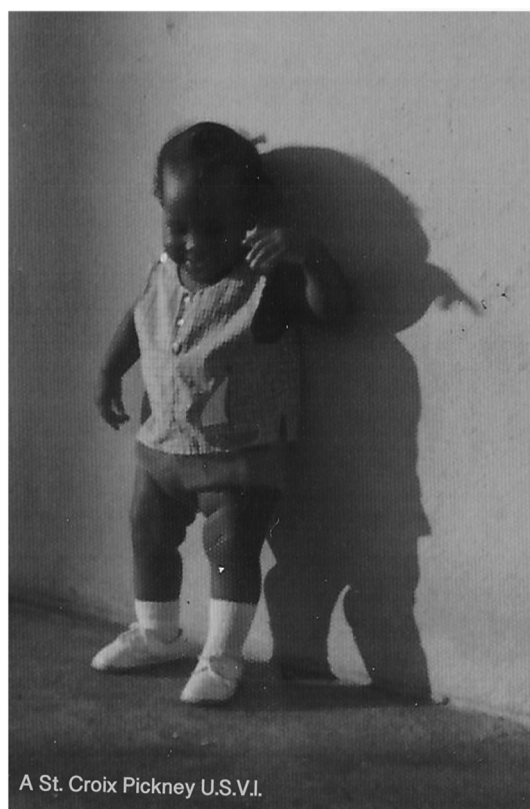
Figure 9. *St. Croix Pickney*. 2016. Digital photograph by La Vaughn Belle. Royal Danish Library. © La Vaughn Belle. Courtesy of the artist.

more intimately register what happened (to families, culture, identity) in the change of custody from Denmark to the United States. When Belle places a photograph of herself as a child in contrast with Ovesen's postcard "A St. Croix Pickney, D.W.I.," something interesting happens (fig. 9). On the one hand the comparison immediately opens the emotional field, expanding the possibilities for what a child from St. Croix could or can experience and feel: she is smiling and happy, looked after, smartly dressed in neat socks and shoes. At the same time, the sensitivity with which her momentary joy is captured only further defines the severity of Ovesen's image, highlighting the need for extra care in the witnessing gaze. Perhaps it is here, in the artist's hospitable gesture, that the seeds for future digital and cultural practices, seeking to attend to histories of enslavement and colonization, can be found.

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